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SUBJECT: Vietnam Religious Freedom Update

REF: A) Hanoi 92, B) Hanoi 88

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The number of religious adherents in Vietnam continues to grow, as does the number of religious groups receiving official registration and recognition. At the beginning of 2009, the GVN reported 23 million religious faithful. An additional nine new religious organizations were granted national recognition by the GVN in 2008 and early 2009, including the Baha'i and five Protestant faiths. Registration of Protestant congregations at the local and national level continued to grow in 2008. While local church registration of Protestant denominations has mushroomed in the Central Highlands and the South, there continue to be more than 1,000 Protestant congregations awaiting registration in the Northwest Highlands. However, even in areas with a backlog, most unregistered Protestant congregations report no major restrictions in their ability to hold services. Hmong Christians in the Northwest also continue to complain about the lack of an official Hmong translation of the Bible. Relations between the Catholic Church and GVN continue to warm, even as tensions over land-use issues remain a serious issue, as demonstrated most recently in Vinh. END SUMMARY.

National Recognition Moves Quickly in 2008  
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¶2. (SBU) Nine religions received national recognition in 2008 and early 2009, triple the number that received recognition throughout ¶2007. The nine are: Bani Muslim Sect (Muslim - Ninh Thuan province), The Threefold Southern Tradition (Buddhist - Giao hoi Phat Dong Nam Tong Minh S Dao), The Threefold Enlightened Truth Path (Buddhist - Minh Ly Dao Tam Tong Mieu), Vietnam Seventh Day Adventist Church (Protestant), Vietnam Baptist Church (Protestant - Grace Southern), Vietnam Baptist Society (Protestant - Southern Baptist), Presbyterian Church of Vietnam (Protestant), Vietnam Mennonite Church (Protestant) and Vietnam Baha'i Community (Baha'i).

¶3. (SBU) The Baha'i, recognized in January 2009, are considered a separate "category" of religion. Similarly, the Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice, recognized at the end of 2007, is viewed as a distinct Buddhist religion, separate from the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha. In total, there are now eight separate categories of religious organizations: Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, The Pure Land Buddhist Home Practice and Baha'i. In 2008, three new religious organizations also received national registration: Vietnam Christian Fellowship (Protestant), Mysterious Fragrance from Precious Mountains (Buddhist - Buu Son Ky Huong), The Four Grattitudes (Buddhist - Dao Tu An Hieu Nghia).

Central Highlands Leading the Way...  
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¶4. (SBU) Throughout the country, the number of locally registered Protestant congregations also increased. In Ho Chi Minh City alone, there are now 130 registered Protestant congregations. Leading the way in the growth of Protestantism is the Central Highlands, which at the end of 2008 could boast a total of 1,175 registered

Protestant congregations, of which 795 are affiliated with Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and the remainder belong to other Protestant denominations. Currently in the Central Highlands, there are 134 registered Protestant church buildings, all but one affiliated with the SECV.

... but Northwest Highlands Remains Problematic  
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¶5. (SBU) Growth in registered congregations in the Northwest Highlands lagged behind the rest of the country due to continued foot dragging by local officials. At the end of 2008, a total of 130 congregations had been registered, of which, 126 are affiliated with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN), and the remaining four belong to the Vietnam Christian Fellowship Church. While this is an increase from the 84 that were registered in 2007, the number represents a small fraction of the total. The ECVN reports 1,234 congregations with 135,500 adherents in the Northwest Highlands. In Dien Bien Province alone, the ECVN reports 444 congregations and 72,500 followers. (According to the ECVN, nearly all of its adherents are ethnic minorities, of which 88 percent are Hmong.)

¶6. (SBU) The vast majority of these congregations await formal registration, but continue to operate with the tacit permission of local officials. According to Pastor Au Quang Vinh, Secretary General of the ECVN, these unregistered congregations function without interference, though there are occasional incidents of harassment. Pastor Vinh noted the importance of official local registration for facilitating training, as well as pastoral travel.

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Hmong Bibles  
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¶7. (SBU) The ECVN also awaits approval for the dissemination of a Hmong translation of the Bible, an important priority, he said, given the fact that most Hmong pastors lack formal education in Vietnamese. He explained that the ECVN in 2006 provided the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) and the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) with a side-by-side Vietnamese-Hmong translation of the Bible and asked for permission to print it in Hmong. In meetings with the Embassy, the CRA has stated that they have no objection to the translation but that it is MOET's responsibility to authenticate the translation prior to allowing publication. The Ambassador sent a letter on January 23 to DPM Nguyen Thien Nhan, who also serves as Minister of Education and Training, urging that MOET speed approval.

Catholics: Better Conditions, but Tensions over Land  
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¶8. (SBU) Meeting with the Ambassador just before Tet (ref. A), Hanoi Archbishop Joseph Ngo Quang Kiet emphasized continued general improvements in the overall ability of Catholics (and others) to exercise their religion freely. He did, however, point to problems registering congregations in the Northwest Highlands, particularly Son La. He also pointed to a continuing "lack of trust" on land-use issues, highlighting moves by Hanoi authorities to transform two Church-claimed properties into public parks.

¶9. (SBU) The issue is likely not going away, the Prime Minister's recently issued decree on the land-use rights of religious groups (ref. B) notwithstanding, as events on February 2 in Vinh suggest. In Vinh, tensions flared as Bishop Paul Maria Cao Dinh Thuyen led 14 priests in celebrating mass at a disputed site seized by the government in 1997. According to Catholic internet reports, the mass was attended by thousands of parishioners, who believe that the property -- a church significantly damaged by U.S. bombing in 1968 and subsequently turned into a war memorial -- should be returned to the local diocese.

Comment  
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¶10. (SBU) Much remains to be done, particularly in enforcing the 2004 Ordinance on Religion and Belief at the local level. But we see developments in 2008 as continuing the broadly positive trends begun in 2006. It is particularly noteworthy that in addition to the Baha'i, five Protestant denominations -- including two different Baptist churches -- obtained national recognition in 2008 and early ¶2009. And while land-rights disputes grabbed the headlines, relations between Vietnam and the Church continued to warm. While random incidents of harassment, especially in outlying areas, did occur in 2008, religious leaders representing all the major denominations in Vietnam, registered and unregistered, uniformly agree that, overall, religious freedom and adherence continues to expand in Vietnam.

¶11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Ho Chi Minh City.